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A Prescription to Live By: Ransom and the Agrarian Debates

In the preface to the paperback edition of *I'll Take My Stand,* published more than thirty years after the book first appeared, Louis D. Rubin, Jr., points out that this collection of Agrarian essays has been the "center of constant controversy" and that "not a single writer about the Modern South has failed to mention and discuss it." Twenty years earlier, Donald Davidson had complained that the book "has this unique distinction: it has been refuted by more people who have never read it—or even seen a copy—than any other book in American history." At the time of its appearance, on November 12, 1930, it was widely reviewed; newspapers in cities in all sections of the country carried comments, although most of them were perfunctory notices and few seemed to be aware of what the writers of the essays were aiming at. In her unpublished dissertation, "The Making and Meaning of *I'll Take My Stand,*" Virginia Rock lists more than twenty-five southern newspapers that carried reviews, and almost that many from outside the region, including five New York papers as well as those in St. Louis, Buffalo, Detroit, Hartford, Boston, Chicago, Omaha, and Des Moines. Although one might well argue that the book has never received a completely fair and unbiased hearing, many of these early notices were far from unfriendly. William S. Knickerbocker, who later confronted both Ransom and Davidson in public debate, called it the "most audacious book ever

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written by Southerners," and the "most challenging book published in the United States since Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*." John Temple Graves said the book was a good antidote to the "platitudes of progress." Another reviewer indicated that the writers of these essays reminded one of the "pleasures of the husking bee, the dance with real violins" and showed how he may avoid the "goading, selfish ambitions which drive his city brother into despair, neuroticism or an early grave." A reviewer in the Des Moines *Register* predicted that these writers "are very likely to form a nucleus for hundreds of more writers, who will be encouraged by the call of these men."

Even though John Peale Bishop wrote Tate of his agreement with the major premises of the book and T. S. Eliot announced in the *Criterion* that "it is a sound and right reaction which impelled Mr. Allen Tate and his eleven Southerners to write their book," not everyone, of course, was convinced by the soundness of the book's argument or by what many regarded as its futile attempt to disregard a hundred years and more of progress. A columnist in the Macon *Telegraph* labeled the volume "a high spot in the year's hilarity" and the Nashville *Tennessean* reported the reaction of Chancellor James H. Kirkland of Vanderbilt: "You can't get back to the agrarian scheme of things. There are arguments on both sides as to the virtues of each system of living, but it's an entirely academic discussion because the anti-industrial plan is impractical." Henry Hazlitt, who entitled his lengthy attack in the *Nation,* "So Did Canute," argued that the Agrarians would be no more successful than that ancient king in stemming the tide of progress. "This book," he wrote, "is in the main, the rationalization of a nostalgia for ancestral ways rather than a rational approach to real problems." H. L. Mencken attacked the book both in the *American Mercury* and the *Virginia Quarterly Review*. "The South," he wrote, "can no more revive the simple society of the Jefferson era than England can revive that of Queen Anne. The mills and factories are there to stay and they must be faced. Nothing can be done to help the farmers who still struggle on. . . . They are doomed to become proletarians and the sooner the change is effected the better." Reaction to the book, to say the least, was mixed. It was, as Rubin points out, "ridiculed, condemned, championed," everything "except ignored."

Certainly Ransom was not surprised by the charges that he and his fellow contributors were neo-Confederates, poets, fugitives, and escapists, romantics unwilling to face the realities of modern life. It could be argued, in fact, that he, and they, were pleased with the controversy the book aroused because at least it was noticed, and, as it happened, this

kind of reaction provided several opportunities for the Agrarians to present their case directly to the people.

While the essays were being prepared and collected, Ransom shared with all who would allow him to his interest in projects to follow the symposium. The first acquisition of the group, he wrote Tate on January 5, must be a county newspaper. "Both Don and I are very discouraged about the good of academic employment," he wrote, and "I would gladly get out at a little sacrifice; so would Don if his wife would let him."* He suggested that the income from the symposium be used for acquiring a paper and was irritated when Davidson said half-jokingly that the $300 advance from Harper's would "come in handy for summer expenses of the contributors." He feared Davidson was "trying to break up the idea of acquiring a paper"; perhaps he was "afraid of the decisions involved." Ransom expressed his intention to oppose very strongly "the divisions of the spoils now or after the volume has been on sale." Although he became convinced that Davidson could not break loose to run the paper, he was delighted that Lytle and Owsley approved of the project, and he assured Tate that he would edit a paper for the group if he did not have to make too much of a financial sacrifice. "That I can't do," he wrote, "since I have not only my acquired family, but my original one, that is, my parents, in part to look after. But I will make some sacrifice anyway. As far as that is concerned, a county paper couldn't furnish much less of a living than does a minor professorship in a college. My wife and I are quite willing to take a chance if it doesn't look too much like suicide." Although nothing definite came of the project, the seriousness of Ransom's intention was demonstrated by the fact that when Lytle said in midsummer that a good crop would enable him to make a down payment on a paper, Ransom made definite inquiries about several Tennessee county papers which were thought to be for sale. His attitude for several years continued to be that expressed in a letter to Tate on January 25, 1930. "We must," he insisted, "get a county newspaper . . . . The book itself is scarcely worth doing if we don't follow it up, and if, in short, we don't get a press and put it to work."

All of the Agrarians were eager to defend themselves against such

* The letters to and from Donald Davidson referred to in this essay are in the Jesse E. Wills Collection of the Joint University Libraries of Nashville, Tennessee, and are used here with the permission of Theresa Sherrer Davidson. Ransom's letters to Allen Tate are in the Firestone Library of Princeton University and are used here with the permission of Robb Reavill Ransom.

charges as "unreconstructed rebels," "typewriter agrarians," and "tower-of-ivory agrarians," and their first opportunity came even before the book appeared. In the October, 1930, issue of the *Virginia Quarterly Review,* Stringfellow Barr, a young historian who had been considered as a possible contributor to *I'll Take My Stand,* argued that the South must recognize that industrialism is already established in the section. Rather than ignoring this fact, the leaders of the region should enact appropriate regulatory statutes so that the "new industrial experiment" will "rehabilitate her economically without wrecking her spiritually." Exactly a week after this essay appeared, the Nashville *Tennessean* carried an open letter, signed by Ransom, Tate, and Davidson, accusing Barr of having abandoned the southern tradition whose "virtues were leisure, kindliness, and the enjoyment of the simple life . . . , virtues which thrive in an agrarian climate but do badly in an industrial." The Associated Press picked up the letter and circulated it throughout the South. Five days later, Lambert Davis, managing editor of the *Virginia Quarterly Review,* proposed in a letter to Donald Davidson a public debate between Barr and a member of the Agrarian group, the debate to be held either at Charlottesville, at Nashville, or at some neutral city like Richmond. As soon as Davidson received the letter, he discussed the proposal with his colleagues, who were immensely pleased to have an opportunity to present their argument to a general audience, many of whom their book would not reach. The only difficulty was that no member of the group felt he could afford to pay his expenses to Richmond or Charlottesville, and they had no prospects of raising the funds necessary to hold the debate in Nashville. Davidson was instructed to express these reactions to Davis.

Ten days after Davidson had written that to him and his fellow Agrarians the idea of a public debate seemed "excellent from every standpoint," if the required financial support could be found, Davis sent a telegram saying the Richmond *Times-Dispatch* had agreed to sponsor the debate in that city. Davidson sent a telegram accepting the proposal and naming Ransom as spokesman for the group. On October 16, Allen Cleaton, managing editor of the *Times-Dispatch,* issued the official invitation for November 14, two days after the book was formally released. In his telegram Cleaton stated the topic for debate as "Regulated Industrialism versus Agrarianism"; to which, Davidson responded: "Take pleasure in accepting your fine-spirited offer for debate November 14 . . . . We dislike use of the word regulated in question for debate. Prefer sharp statement Industrialism vs Agrarianism or simply Shall the South go Industrial. We do not of course propose a return to stone age

but ask for a fair field for contrasting arguments." The next few weeks were filled with activity. Many details had to be taken care of in correspondence; invitations were issued to distinguished Southerners, many of whom were invited to sit on the platform; and in an attempt to stimulate interest in the debate, publicity releases were sent to all the newspapers in the area. One such release, printed in the *Times-Dispatch,* gave a succinct statement of the two opposing positions:

> Both Mr. Barr and Mr. Ransom agree that there was once an agrarian economy that defined the Southern way of life and created the Southern tradition.
>
> Both Mr. Barr and Mr. Ransom agree that the new industrial economy, which dominates most sections of the Union, is now beginning to grip the South, belated as its appearance is. What is the South to do?
>
> At this point Mr. Barr and Mr. Ransom differ sharply.
>
> Mr. Barr considers that industrialism of the South is now inevitable . . . . Agrarianism has lost the fight.
>
> Mr. Ransom argues that the Southern economy is still largely agrarian and that the fight of the agrarian tradition to maintain itself is not lost in advance . . . .
>
> Mr. Barr finds that industrialism is, on the whole, advisable for the South, if only the proper precautions are taken . . . .
>
> Mr. Ransom considers that industrialism for the South is, on the whole, more deplorable than desirable . . . . He considers that, even under the best regulations conceivable, the life of industrial labor is unworthy. He would have the South fight for its agrarian economy.

Almost all the final details were settled by October 30, when Davis informed Davidson that Sherwood Anderson, then living in Troutdale, Virginia, would serve as chairman. "I think, all things considered," Davis wrote Davidson, "the selection of Anderson a very wise one. . . . Anderson has the advantage of being a good person from a publicity point of view and also a man who has first-hand experience of both the industrial and agrarian regimes." During the next two weeks many distinguished persons accepted the invitation to sit on the platform, and many of those who could not attend sent commendatory messages. Among the latter group were Stark Young, Heywood Broun, and Walter Lippman.

On Friday morning, November 14, Ransom arrived in Richmond accompanied by Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, and Donald Davidson,

the last of whom had been commissioned to cover the debate for the Chattanooga *News*. A little before eight o'clock that evening they arrived at the Richmond City Auditorium and found many of the 3,500 seats already occupied. After greeting some of their many friends already in the audience, they made their way to the platform where Tate and Davidson would join other distinguished guests: Governor John Garland Pollard of Virginia, former Governor Westmoreland Davis, President F. W. Boatwright of the University of Richmond, Mayor J. Fulmer Bright of Richmond, and others. In the audience Caroline Gordon sat with Ellen Glasgow, Henry Seidel Canby, Norman Thomas, Howard Mumford Jones, H. L. Mencken, and James Branch Cabell. When Sherwood Anderson arose to introduce the speakers, every seat in the auditorium was filled; and some of the Boy Scouts, who had served as ushers, and a few late comers lined the back wall.

Before presenting the speakers, Anderson gave some of his reactions to the subject to be discussed, declaring his desire to be a "worm in the apple of progress" and indicating his pleasure at seeing a "movement of young people in favor of the dignity of life on the farm and in small communities." Although Ransom was surely pleased to receive such an obvious display of support from the master of ceremonies, he must have been taken aback to hear Anderson anticipate one of the principal points of his argument: industrialism leads inevitably to communism. Each of the speakers was allotted forty minutes, but Ransom took almost an hour to read his carefully prepared, closely reasoned, and unimpassioned address. Anyone familiar with Barr's published writing on the subject, Ransom pointed out, would know that he used the southern tradition merely "as a gardenia to stick in his buttonhole when he goes traveling in New York." What the section needs, Ransom insisted, are leaders who will use this tradition as "a prescription to live by." The kinds of checks Barr recommends for the regulations of industry would take many years to develop, and all of them—collective bargaining, workman's compensation, unemployment insurance, and old age pensions—are serious breaches of individualism and self-sufficiency, both integral components of the southern tradition. The laborers who come off the farm to enter the factory never dream "that any sort of economic life in a peaceful country" will "require them to surrender their individualism and join an army in order to get a decent protection." What they do not realize is that when they become "industrialists" they cease to be persons and become "units of industrial power," "factors in something called mass production." Near the end of his address, Ransom moved boldly into the point for which Anderson had prepared the audience:

> By the least construction we can put upon Mr. Barr's language, he stands for the strongest unionism. And since he wants state action, he is a laborite—he is prepared to let labor become a political party and run the government as in Great Britain. But let us go further yet. Socialism of the variety practiced in a half-way house like Great Britain is a program of regulation which is merely temporizing. It approaches everyday closer to communism . . . and the grand finale of regulation, the millenium itself, is Russian communism.

Neither Mr. Barr nor anyone else, Ransom insisted, "will ever succeed in regulating into industrialism the dignity of personality, which is gone as soon as the man from the farm goes into the factory." Just before Ransom sat down to what Davidson described as "loud applause," he reminded his audience of the virtues of the agrarian life—"fresh air and sunshine, and contact with the elemental soil, and the enjoyment of labor"—and encouraged southern leaders (and here he directed his remarks to the distinguished platform guests) to form a political bloc to support the agrarian way and to return to the farm themselves "as object lessons to their respective communities."

Ransom had evidently attempted to make his argument as simple, direct, and concrete as possible, and his delivery of the prepared paper, though quiet, dignified, and perhaps too formal, was persuasive because his sincerity was immediately evident to all who heard him. Barr's presentation was a complete contrast at every point. He did not read a manuscript but spoke from notes in a fiery, epigramatic tone and sat down after twenty minutes. He had from the very first, Davidson reported, the complete attention of the audience. The system of agriculture in the South, he began, had been established because it was the best way available at that time to make a living. Almost everyone would agree, he continued, that the South has achieved an admirable culture upon this economic foundation, but he could not advise a return to the soil. There is nothing to be gained from "creating out of the farm a mystic lost cause." The southerner must live *now*. Anyway, he observed, the farmers did not reject Jefferson's new and improved plow "because God had a special fondness for the old model and resented the innovation." Progress is inevitable, he concluded, and the South must develop controls so that the industrialism which is here now and that which is sure to come can be used for the good of all the people of the section. What Ransom had called "communism," he preferred to call "paternalism." That "bogey doesn't frighten me. The history of our government shows that we have adopted many paternalistic features and grown used to them,

and if paternalistic features should be eliminated from our government, the whole modern system would have to be wiped out." With this statement he reached the climactic conclusion for which he had skillfully prepared the audience: "When problems are complex, you ought never to cry 'I'll take my Stand' but 'Sit Down and Think.' " With that he sat down to "thunderous applause and roars of laughter."

The rebuttals were as well received as the speeches. The debate was concluded shortly after eleven o'clock and the stage was immediately filled with supporters of both speakers. No winner was declared but Davidson noted: "During the course of the debate, Mr. Barr's stringent sentences won him at times perhaps a bit more applause than Mr. Ransom's very solid and systematic argument got." The several reporters in the audience went off to file their stories, some of which were picked up by press associations and for the next few weeks news stories, feature stories, cartoons, and editorials appeared in newspapers throughout the southern and eastern United States. The *Times-Dispatch* reported that the Agrarians "are not children crying for the moon or sentimentalists weeping for a lost generation." Writing in the Baltimore *Evening Sun,* Virginius Dabney pointed out that the debate in Richmond was just one battle in an extensive campaign: "By means of books, magazine articles, and public debates, the Nashvillians and their allies plan to carry the war into the enemy's country and bring a halt to the industrialization of the Southland." A few days earlier, he had said, "They are still talking here [in Richmond] about the debate on the industrialization of the South." Apparently Ransom was in complete agreement with Davidson's statement in the Chattanooga *News,* that the debate suggests "infinite possibilities of free and honest discussion before local audiences." The impact of this initial debate and its broad coverage in the press resulted in the scheduling of three similar discussions within the next few months, a development which pleased Ransom and the other Agrarians very much because they felt these public debates were the best possible means of carrying their argument from academe into the marketplace.

Soon after Ransom returned to Nashville, he had an invitation from President Alexander Guerry of the University of Chattanooga to debate Barr in early February. Although he accepted immediately, Barr was not available at that time; so the debate was set for January 9, 1931. In the meantime, H. C. Nixon scheduled a debate between Ransom and William S. Knickerbocker, editor of the *Sewanee Review,* for December 15 in New Orleans. On December 4, Ransom wrote Tate of his travel plans to New Orleans and back. He was going to drive down on Thursday,

December 11, leaving Nashville before daylight and arriving in New Orleans about mid-day on Friday. Aside from a speech to the Round Table Club on Saturday and the debate with Knickerbocker on Monday evening, he had no plans, he wrote Tate, "except to study the loyalty of our Southern people and a plan to return to these headquarters about Thursday night." On the day Ransom mailed his letter he received one from Tate expressing his sorrow that a previous commitment would prevent his going to New Orleans and asking if Knickerbocker would definitely be his opponent. The next day Ransom responded:

> Yes, Knickerbocker is my opponent, and he came into the office here Wednesday, after first asking me if I had a gun. He is a cheery fellow, friendly, bright and foolish as ever, but I do not find it in my unmilitary nature to continue to feel sore at him. Perhaps I'll have a reversion about the 15th inst. We discussed the debate and decided that he would lead off on the ground that he *attacked our book;* and I would defend. Ten-minute rebuttals. I expect to enjoy this bout, having out-grown my first greenness. I expect even more to enjoy New Orleans and Louisiana and will bring back to you and Lytle the fullest report.

He did enjoy his visit to New Orleans. Nixon had made excellent arrangements for his stay and after the talk to the Round Table Club at noon Saturday, which went well, he thought, because his audience appeared attentive and the questions they asked afterward seemed to indicate they understood what he had said, he had plenty of time to see some of the local points of interest. After dinner Saturday evening in one of the many excellent restaurants there, followed by some interesting conversation with Nixon and some of his friends, he drove around the city on Sunday and enjoyed particularly the many lovely old homes in the garden district near Tulane University. On Monday evening at eight o'clock, Knickerbocker arose to address an audience of approximately one thousand persons. His delivery was not as impressive as Barr's had been at Richmond, but his message was about the same. If the South is to maintain its rightful position in regard to the other sections of the country, it must develop a diverse economy based on carefully regulated industry, commerce, and agriculture. Ransom had relaxed his style of presentation a little, relying less on a prepared text and more upon his informal but effective classroom manner. In his report of their meeting, which appeared in the *Sewanee Review* for April, 1931, Knickerbocker said that Ransom's lament for the plight of farmers,

"who had become little more than robots as mill workers screwing on bolt no. 47 day after day, won the audience vote for agrarianism." In his "subtle employment of sentiment" lay "the seductiveness of his appeal." There was no doubt in the minds of Nixon and many others who listened to the debate that agrarianism had won the day. Ransom left New Orleans in good spirits, ready for the next encounter with Barr, who he was convinced had given him a "thorough trouncing" in Richmond.

On his way down to New Orleans, as he was traveling through Meridian, Laurel, and Hattiesburg, Mississippi, he realized that he was passing near Taylorsville, where he had taught almost twenty years before. He decided then that when he had finished in New Orleans he would drive by there if he had time to see if he could recognize anyone or anything. After an early lunch in Laurel, he drove along the recently constructed gravel highway through a village with the unlikely name of Soso and into Taylorsville, looking to see if there were any familiar sights. Most of the virgin pine timber, he noted, was gone and on the gently rolling hills and in the valleys where it had once stood were fields where the previous summer corn, cotton, sugar cane, and watermelons had grown. In the town, which was not much larger than he remembered it, he could recognize many of the stores, although cars had replaced the horse-drawn vehicles on the single main street, now paved. He found his way to the Methodist church he had attended and finally to the school. There in the newly consolidated high school, a large one-story brick building which housed more than five hundred students and their twenty-odd teachers, he found that the senior high school English teacher was Miss Dorrence Eaton, who had been in school when he taught there. Her younger sister Corinne had been one of Ransom's students. He was flattered, he said much later, to learn that Miss Eaton not only remembered him but had followed his literary career and owned a volume of his poetry. As he drove back down the highway toward Meridian, where he would spend the night, he was convinced that the farmers in this remote Mississippi county were practicing the kind of subsistence farming he and his colleagues were advocating.

The debate in Chattanooga on January 9, although well attended, was a relatively tame affair. Ransom's success in New Orleans had restored his confidence in his ability to reach a general audience. With the main points of his argument within easy recall, he decided to discard his prepared paper and, like Barr, to speak from notes. Although Ransom's manner was much more persuasive than it had been in their previous meeting, Barr's was not so pugnacious. He was less witty and more conciliatory, Davidson reported; consequently there was no real

clash of personality, no obvious contrast in styles of delivery, and a much less exciting debate.

The fourth and the last of Ransom's debates was not so mild. Held on February 11 at Emory University as a part of a program sponsored by the Institute of Citizenship, Ransom debated William D. Anderson, president of the Bibb Manufacturing Company of Macon, Georgia, on the question: "Shall the South Follow the East and Go Industrial?" Before an audience reported to be "more than a thousand," Ransom repeated the main points of the argument he had given three times before in a manner that was becoming more relaxed and informal with each presentation. "Industrialism has but one genius," Ransom proclaimed, "and that is the genius of production, in which it makes no provision for emergencies. As a part of the genius of production, it developed advertising and salesmanship to overcome the natural good taste of the people and their natural thrift." After stressing the dangers of a one-crop system, the evils of overproduction, and the attempt to create false need through high-powered advertising techniques, Ransom reached his climax. The South "must go agrarian," the factory workers "must go back to the land," for only in this way can "the menace of unemployment be halted." Only by a return to the land, a movement that should be assisted by the state, can the South "return to and maintain a permanent prosperity" and its citizens retain a quality of life superior to that in other sections of the country. "A man gets poor food in industrialism," he concluded; "machines, streets, and noise are abstractions. He needs actually to touch stone, earth and wood, and to know the infinite variety of nature."

William Anderson's argument emphasized the expected points. Ransom, he insisted, is living in "an age of romanticism now gone forever." Although it is true that the old civilization to which he wants the South to return "developed a fine life for those in the big house," it did much less for the less fortunate. "Our nation," he said, "is moving toward a greater conception of universal brotherhood, and if industry has done this, I say give us more industry." The only possibility for the farmer to know the good life is "by an increase in the industrial development." To demonstrate the peace, harmony, and good feeling between labor and management that can exist in a modern industrial establishment, Anderson brought with him a group of young girls trained in the schools of the mill. They entertained the audience with recitations and songs, and, according to Sherwood Anderson "he had them well trained. In the midst of the debate they marched in. They stood before the audience." One of the recitations went as follows:

"Who do you love?" a leader asked.
"Anderson! Anderson!" they shouted.
"Who is the greatest man in the South?"
"Anderson! Anderson!"

The last of the debates was held in Columbia, Tennessee, May 21, 1931. This time Ransom was in the audience, not on the platform. The Ransoms, the Tates, and the Lyle Laniers left Nashville about mid-afternoon in Ransom's car and stopped outside Franklin for a picnic lunch before driving on to Columbia. The debate, sponsored by the Columbia *Herald,* was held in the auditorium of Central High School, which was filled almost to capacity when the Nashville delegation arrived at 7:30, a half hour before the announced starting time. At 7:55 the two debaters, Donald Davidson and William S. Knickerbocker, mounted the platform, preceded by Judge W. C. Whitthorne, the moderator, the Reverend Mr. Thomas N. Carruthers, who would introduce Knickerbocker, and James I. Finney, editor of the *Herald* and official sponsor of the debate, who would present Davidson. Like Ransom's in the Richmond debate, Davidson's argument was presented in a written statement and was a closely reasoned analysis of the evils of industrialism, regulated or not. An industrialized state would lead first to socialism and finally to communism. The absurdity of arguing for controlled industrialism was presented in an analogy near the end of his presentation:

> Those who would argue pro and con on the issue as thus stated are like the people who let a dragon into the house and then set about a wild speculation as to whether the dragon should be required to eat in the dining-room or the kitchen, and what his hours of feeding, and his diet should be. And all the time the real argument should be: How shall we get the dragon out of the house in the first place, and back into his den where he will not devour us? I want to get the industrial dragon out of the house, where he never belonged, and back in his proper place, wherever that may be.

Although there is no written account of what Knickerbocker said on this occasion, apparently his argument was very much similar to the one he gave in his debate with Ransom in New Orleans. Anyone familiar with the studies of the modern social scientists knows that the standard of living in the South is the lowest in the country, and the only way the section can rise from its position at the bottom of the statistical table is

through an economic system that combines commerce, industry, and agriculture.

Many years later Ransom referred to these debates as "larks" which he thoroughly enjoyed because they gave him and his colleagues a very pleasant way of presenting their views directly to the people. He had always been interested in public debate and hoped with Donald Davidson that these five occasions on which important issues had been discussed before interested and often enthusiastic audiences were illustrative of the revival in the South of "its old and nearly vanished genius for honest and forthright public argument." The excitement of appearing before a not completely sympathetic audience led him to make regular appearances before Rotary clubs a few years later in England and sometimes on these occasions to make his talks more provocative and controversial than the assigned subject required. But although Ransom surely had deep convictions regarding the social and economic principles, the defense of which received a major portion of his creative energy during the late twenties and early thirties, this was not the happiest period of his life nor the most productive of his literary career. Despite the fact that he published four poems between 1927 and 1929, he seemed to realize that most of his best poetry was already written. On several occasions Tate asked Ransom for poems—in 1932 when he was guest editor for a southern number of *Poetry* and several times while he was southern editor of *Hound and Horn*—and always Ransom's response was similar to that of January 31, 1932: "I have nothing so far; have never finished that poem of which I showed you a part; have not succeeded . . . in writing the kind of poem I wanted to and have not tried it yet very extensively. Nothing whatever. The best I can do is to say I'll give the muse a chance and will send you anything I can do that seems up to the mark; but doubt whether that undertaking is good for performance. Don't count on me." He did try but the muse would not respond and the appearances of poems were further and further apart. There are other evidences that he was not entirely pleased with the turn his career had taken. Although he thought *God without Thunder* a "sincere book" and one he "had to write," he also knew it was "incomplete," that he had rushed into print before he was in complete control of the material it contained. During this period more and more of his time and effort went into the production of manuscripts on political, social, and economic subjects, many of which were never published. Either they did not meet his always exacting standards or he could never cast them in a form acceptable to the publishers. The truth of the matter is that Ransom's

political and social ideas are neither as novel nor as arresting as are his provocative and highly original speculations on literary theory. And the statement of these economic arguments lack the precision, the concreteness, and the clarity—and thus the force and conviction—that one finds in the best of the essays of this type written by some of Ransom's fellow Agrarians, particularly those of Davidson and John Donald Wade. This never-quite-stated dissatisfaction with his literary career is reflected in his personal life. His often expressed willingness to give up his position at Vanderbilt to become the editor of a county newspaper is, in part at least, an indication of his growing unrest, his conviction that something was wrong with what he was doing and how he was living. What he needed, he concluded, was a complete change of scenery. When a chance came, therefore, to spend a year in England—a sojourn which he and Robb had talked about and planned for almost ten years—he was so excited that he could hardly make the definite arrangements required for his family of four to take up an extended residence in a foreign country.